Creating a Successful Academic Climate for Urban Students

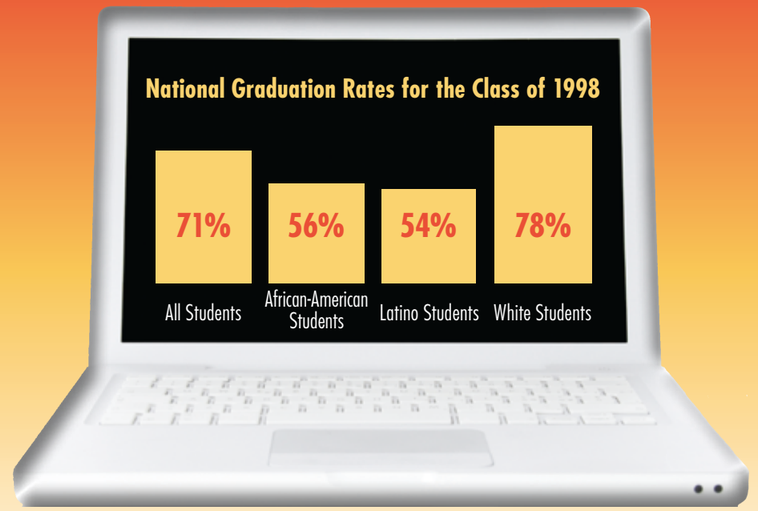
BY TERRI SLAUGHTER

Teaching students in the inner city has been likened to hugging a porcupine—teachers nudge them toward success while getting pricked along the way. Many urban students perform below proficiency level and are difficult to manage. Their apathy toward completing class assignments, let alone homework, compounds the problem. As a whole, educators do their best to reverse the tide, despite the student's resistance. Statistics confirm that children who live in poverty are more likely to drop out and for many students who lack even one supportive, motivated role model at home, life gets in the way of following through with educational goals and plans.

Even with those statistics in mind, when urban teachers observe the yearly trend of students who fail to return to school after an unsuccessful freshman year, the question begs, "What else could our school have offered to encourage them to finish their education?" As part of the noblest profession in the world, we as educators must take the time to assess how technological innovations might assist us in delivering relevant instruction in our 21st century classrooms.

Need for a Change

John Dewey, philosopher and educator, was viewed as the father of progressive education. Even today, more than 50 years after his death, we can learn from his educational philosophies. Dewey advocated a "new movement in education" to fulfill the needs of the industrial revolution. Today, we have all but completely moved from that industrial society into the era of technology. However, many educators are still tied to the educational mode of a time passed. Our world today has become the electronic world. Cell phones, instant messaging, texting, chat rooms and wikis are the predominant means used today by our youth to communicate and disseminate information. Is it any wonder, then, that our students have become bored, restless and discontent in our four-walled classrooms? As Venezsky notes in his book *Technology in the Classroom*, "a new level of teaching and learning must be advanced to a new level of effectiveness and social importance in order to keep our students engaged" and attracted to the idea of lifelong learning.



Urban Graduation Rate Crisis

The United States has little to take comfort in when viewing its graduation rates; they have dropped to an all-time low when compared globally. According to a May 2008 article in *The Economist's View*, the United States ranks 17th among nations reporting high school graduation rates; in China, virtually all high school students graduate. Of even greater concern today is the United States urban graduation rates. We are well acquainted with the fact that our nation's high school graduation rate hovers between 68 and 71 percent in this country. However, these figures are highly inflated for many of our large cities. Statistics show that districts where most students are members of racial or ethnic minorities have graduation rates almost 20 percentage points lower than districts with a white majority (*Education Week*). Sadly, the odds of graduating from high school in 50 of America's largest urban cities amounts, essentially, to a coin toss. The public, and even many educators, remains largely unaware of this national crisis. The data suggest that as educators, we must rethink how to empower and engage students in order to keep them as active participants in our country's future.

Shenzhen, China

Half a world away Shenzhen, China, is the second busiest port in mainland China. Looking back a mere 30 years, this city was a small fishing village with dirt roads and rice paddies. Now in 2008, it is a metropolis with a landscape of skyscrapers, luxury apartments and shopping malls. This modern city sends out barges loaded with shipping pods at an astounding rate of one pod per second—seven days a week, 365 days per year—with half of the exports headed to the United States (Wikipedia). What do these shipping containers hold? In part, iPhones, iPods, Apple notebooks and personal computing components from manufacturers with names such as Dell, Sony, Compaq, HP, Apple, NEC, Gateway and Toshiba. With the trend of overseas manufacturing, it is hard to deny that America has transitioned from being the world's largest manufacturing country to being heralded in 2008 as its largest consumer. As a result of this shift, our nation's middle class jobs have been reduced.

Obsolescence: Chalkboards and Slide Rules

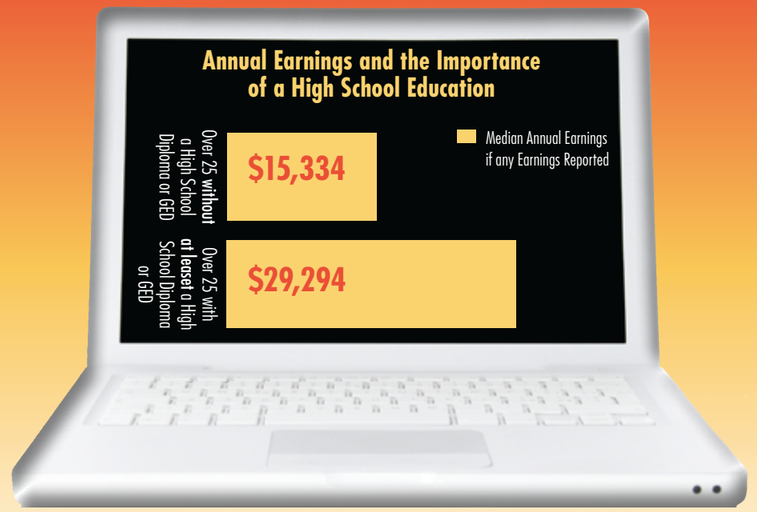
American labor and service industry trades, commonly referred to as blue-collar or skilled labor, are increasingly being outsourced to overseas companies. However, many of the remaining jobs have evolved from manual labor to computer-based systems. In order to compete, managers and supervisors must have extensive knowledge of business, science and heightened technological abilities. If we are not solidifying these skills with our students and requiring them to think creatively, systematically and methodically, our students' futures will be limited to menial labor positions.

Ohio, Michigan and many other pockets of the Midwest have lost their industrial and manufacturing jobs. Steel mills along the Ohio River have disappeared and the manufacturing of these products is being sent overseas. Similar to the story of the tortoise and the hare, the Midwest is steadily and quietly losing its production trades—the jobs in years past which were the foundation of our workforce and economy. In order to keep pace with counterparts in other countries, it is imperative that we add relevance to our children's lives and provide them with a solid technological foundation.

The Influence of Their Surroundings

Looking back at respondents of a March 2006 report by Civic Enterprises for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, it was noted that nearly half (47 percent) of U.S. students who dropped out said that classes

were not interesting. Translation: the connection between real-world relevance and the curriculum had not been made. This has left a chasm of frustration for the student that grows with each passing year. Middle and high school teachers have long observed that a large percentage of students in urban districts become disengaged at the start of the middle grades. When this occurs, research shows that it greatly reduces the odds that they will eventually graduate. Our challenge then, is to create an atmosphere where students can feel successful and enjoy learning. Thankfully, there are many innovations to assist the effective teacher.



Accessible Technology

Creative classrooms take advantage of the many emerging technologies available such as White Boards (SmartBoard), EduBlogs, computer-assisted instruction (CAI) and online products such as Blackboard and WebCT to promote collaboration across content areas within a school or district.

Wikispaces, as well, provide an interactive learning experience for the user. As one member confirms, "Using a wikispace is an amazing tool that encourages the free exchange of ideas and emphasizes high level, clear communication and critical thinking." Such active learning tools are being used in the technology classroom of Gary Thomas, at the Africentric High School in Columbus City Schools. Students use Blackboard to pen journal entry blogs for their weekly writing assignment. Use of this media is a highly effective means of engaging students with thought-provoking, relevant questions.

Each Monday, in order to jumpstart students' thought processes, educator Baba Thomas reads a reflection from Sean Covey's book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, to stimulate his students' thinking. Students are then asked to respond to a given scenario in a concise, grammatically correct paragraph, using the guidelines from the book. For example, in chapter one, students are encouraged to "Be Proactive, Not Reactive" and understand that although they can't control everything that happens to them, they do have control over how they respond to it. Then, based on that premise, the writing prompt is crafted as follows:

You overhear your best friend badmouthing you in front of a group. He or she does not know you overheard the conversation. Just five minutes ago, this friend was sweet-talking you to your face. You feel hurt and betrayed. What will be your proactive responses? (Describe your responses and explain each).

By having students summarize and reflect upon what they have been taught and discussed, they are challenged to reflect and use higher level thinking processes.

What's Out There?

Effective, interactive instruction has been discovered to include three key components: how learners are connected to the content of the course, the instructor, and each other. By using PowerPoint-based games you can incorporate all three. Free Web sites abound such as games created for the classroom by Mark E. Damond (**http://jc-schools.net/TUTORIALS/PPT-GAMES/**). Through these downloads, teachers can quickly transform games such as "Jeopardy," "Who Wants to be a Millionaire," and "Are You Smarter than a Fifth-grader?" into interactive learning tools for their classrooms. Many of these game boards are wonderful to use when you have an unexpected day away from school. You can catalog them in your sub plans so that the students stay on track even in the event of your absence from the classroom.

Another aid is the use of a colorful digital clock which is especially useful for any timed activity (**http://people.uncw.edu/ertzbergerj/ppt_games.html**). Jay Ertzberg at the Watson School of Education at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, has developed this PowerPoint aid along with a variety of educational templates. At his site, all the work is done for you—simply enter your information and use immediately. Permission to use these models in educational settings is given—and best of all, downloads are free!

Additional Web sites such as The Global Schoolhouse (**www.globalschoolnet.org**) provides online project-based learning activities as does another developed by the University of Vermont, (**www.uvm.edu/~jmorris/Sci.html**) which contains links to many science programs. There are virtual field-trips and experiences, science museums, lesson and unit plans, science information and ideas, and videos. Not all of the sites there are free, but there are a variety of programs described. This site is a good place to start probing, analyzing and investigating ideas to incorporate a wealth of resources into your curriculum.

Technology and science teachers alike can't miss the Web site of FIRST (**www.usfirst.org**). FIRST is an acronym: "For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology." This organization sponsors a national robotics contest for elementary, middle and high school students. The largely unknown organization allows students to discover the excitement and rewards of science, technology and engineering. For urban educators, there isn't a better, cost-free opportunity to offer your students hands-on experience in a national robotics competition. Registration is open to schools and youth organizations from September through December with the building and competition process lasting from January through March of each year. NASA generously supplies every competing school with $6,000 to cover the fees and robotics kit. Area technology and engineering partners supply the mentors and additional funding for meals, hotels and spending monies for the students to travel to the competitions. For central Ohio schools, Battelle Memorial, Honda and the National Society of Black Engineers are major sponsors for individual schools. Additionally, mentor teachers can be provided a stipend for their time. These amazing events not only build self-confidence among the students, but encourage collaboration among them, and provide mentoring opportunities with engineering professionals.

Of course, there is no greater way to enhance students learning than when educators work together. As professionals collaborate by using technological resources, teachers can greatly solidify their students' knowledge by using interactivity to accelerate the learning process. The possibilities are, pardon the pun, virtually endless! Experience-based learning can offer greater academic diversity for urban students as well as offer a connection into complex world issues, ideas and concepts.

The use of technology forms the bridge into real-world relevance and creates a more authentic learning experience for students. Innovative teachers can enhance student learning processes and even thwart the would-be dropout by employing effective delivery of instruction. Teachers who are willing to go the extra mile to personalize the education of students and provide a rigorous and engaging curriculum are rewarded by greater student connection and gains.

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Empowered for Success

Students need to partner with us to be creators of content. They should not simply take in all that we, as teachers, dish out. As they pull together pieces of information that relate to the tasks at hand—be that reading a novel, analyzing a math problem, or seeing the cause and effect of the conflict in Iraq—a connection is made that creates authentic learning and increases the relevance of each lesson. Teachers must strive to incorporate technology and 21st century skills into the curriculum of the urban student. By doing so, students will become more knowledgeable, and, in turn, more comfortable in embracing the skills needed to compete in an ever-changing global community. T

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